

Laura Valencia
activist



“How many of you save your seeds?” I’m sitting at the initiation of a South Indian village into a rural social movement. The movement’s leader, Chukki Nanjundaswamy, has asked the audience a revealing question. About a hundred local farmers are sitting in plastic chairs facing the platform where Nanjundaswamy, the only woman present, is waiting for a response. But no hands go up.

“None of you save your seeds?” More silence. “Seed is life itself. When we buy seeds from companies, we are dependent on them. They decide what we grow. They decide how much debt we incur. Farmers’ first right is the right on their seeds. How will we get self-respect if we don’t care for and respect the gifts we get from nature?”

The link Nanjundaswamy makes is one that farmers understand immediately: seeds mean self-respect. But it’s one that took me a long time to understand.

I’ve been in the food justice movement since making videos with migrant workers in North Carolina the summer after my freshman year of college. That’s when I began to understand that the rights of the people who produce and gather food are connected to the rights of the people who eat that food. The single mom trying to buy food for her kid and the single mom whose kids are picking blueberries in eastern North Carolina are, I realized, connected.

But I didn’t consider just how connected they were until I met the team at the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP) during the Heaven on Earth Agrarian Road Trip in 2010. They helped me understand



the link between food and faith and inspired me to spend the rest

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of my summer doing faith-based organizing. As I helped members of a congregation with a plot of empty land connect with local Mexican farmworker women who wanted to launch a market garden, I learned that faith-based organizing is a ready-made method for bringing seemingly distant people together.

Two years later, I was a PHP Food Justice Fellow working in South India with partner organization Chethana to return

seed rights to small farmers. Now I work for La Via Campesina, the world’s largest social movement. But in spite of our international scale, I have learned the most from the small farmers in the Indian state where I live. In Karnataka, small farmers are subject to middlemen (“traders”) who sell their produce at a premium. Their livelihood (and lives) are often threatened by local politicians, loan sharks, land speculators, and international companies.

“We are more than a farmers’ union: we are a rural social movement. We touch every social issue—caste, gender, government policies related to agriculture, and rights to water and electricity. But, most importantly, we fight for self-respect,” Nanjundaswamy tells me.

And here is my latest aha moment. When farmers don’t save seeds, they are shutting up shop. Saving seed means being independent. It is an act of respect—for God’s creation, for agriculture and inherited knowledge, and for yourself as a farmer.

Supply chains and struggle can bring us together, but it is respect that will keep us going. Respect is the seed of change.